DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 856 CS 208 722

AUTHOR Fuchs, Lucy
TITLE The Hidden Messages in Children's Books.
PUB DATE Oct 84
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Florida Reading Association (22nd, Jacksonville, FL, October 18-21, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; *Adolescent Literature; *Censorship; Childhood Interests; *Childrens Literature; Content Analysis; Elementary Secondary Education; Library Role; Literary Devices; *Moral Development; *Moral Issues; Moral Values; Teacher Role; Value Judgment; Values Education

ABSTRACT

Since people's mental makeup is, to a certain extent, based on what they have read and how it has been incorporated into their lives, it is not surprising that considerable attention is paid to what children read. As a consequence, children's books tend to be highly moralistic. Many realistic books today attempt to teach children how to cope with life's difficulties and how to behave in certain situations. The stories have a wide appeal because they discuss problems that are foremost in many children's minds and that they often feel they cannot discuss with their parents. These problems include sibling rivalry, school relationships, children's cruelties, domineering mothers, love, sex, birth control, and divorce. The books portray a range of values, with kindness, caring, understanding, independence, making decisions on one's own, and exhibiting self-control treated as positive qualities, and cruelty, dishonesty, and abuse of drugs and alcohol treated as negative qualities. The books treat most types of sexual behavior as appropriate, emphasizing the problems connected with sexual behavior, its situations, and the need for maturity to deal with it. Some topics such as obedience, respect for elders and authority, and religion--once common themes in children's books--are now largely ignored. Given their content, it is easy to see why many people find children's books disturbing. Groups have sprung up seeking to censor or ban certain works. However, educators or librarians familiar with the books in question have often helped those concerned understand the purpose of the books. (RBW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

[ ] Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED252856

THE HIDDEN MESSAGES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting
of the Florida Reading Association

22nd, Jacksonville, Florida

October 18-21, 1984

by

Lucy Fuchs, Ph.D.

Saint Leo College
P.O. Box 2098
Saint Leo, FL 33574

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lucy Fuchs

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS208722

The Hidden Messages in Children's Books

The book-burners are right! They believe that what we read will affect us. They believe that we become what we read. And, although their response to this is frightening, they are not mistaken in their perception. Our mental makeup is, to a certain extent, based on what we have read and how we have incorporated it into our lives. There are cases on record in which the reading of a single book has completely changed someone's life. For example, Bobby Sands, the Irish revolutionary, claimed that after reading Leon Uris' novel Trinity about Northern Ireland, he became totally committed to the IRA cause, so much so that he was willing to starve himself to death.

Normally, however, it is not a single book that makes the difference in our lives; rather it is the sum total of the reading material that we expose ourselves to, day after day. The woman who reads only frivolous romances is unlikely to exhibit deep interests in world problems and world concerns; her focus will be much closer to home, in her fantasies of an idealized kind of romance. In fact she may well find her own marriage lacking in what she has come to believe should exist in a male-female relationship. The man who reads only the sports page of the newspaper will exhibit this same lack of breadth as he lives vicariously as a quarterback or a tennis pro. The person who reads only one side of a particular issue may well show his narrowness in prejudiced words and actions.

This is true in politics, religion, business, and all other endeavors.

In spite of all the hullabaloo about today's poor readers and the strange statistics that politicians find to show that many students today graduate from schools in an illiterate state, we are still a highly literate people. We rely on reading for a large portion of our knowledge, so much so that persons who cannot read are truly handicapped. We all read, everything from the daily newspaper to serious books. The real issue is not that Americans cannot read. We can read and we certainly do read. Many millions of books are sold every year. But the issue is that our people do not look carefully at what is being read. They do not select their reading material as carefully as they select their food. The National Enquirer sells more copies of each issue than do the Atlantic Monthly or Harper's. We are giving people junk food instead of nourishing meals. The value system in most reading material of the mass market is at the lowest common denominator.

However, people are concerned about what is fed to children. As a consequence, children's books tend to be highly moralistic, in the sense that they are concerned with teaching children right from wrong. Many "realistic" (as opposed to fantasy) books for children today can be called "problem books." because they attempt to deal with problems of modern children. They came into their own only in the last twenty years. The stories are simply a cover for teaching the children things that apparently they need to know. The best

loved (by children) and the most clever at concealing moralism under both humor and a good story, is undoubtedly Judy Blume. She tackles such problems as sibling rivalry (Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing), school relationships and children's cruelties (Blubber), domineering mothers who have plans for their daughters (Deenie which also discusses masturbation), divorce of the parents (It's Not the End of the World), growing up male (Then Again, Maybe I Won't) or female (Are You There, God, It's Me, Margaret which also copes with religious beliefs, first love or perhaps first sex (Her Forever is almost clinical in its approach to sex, birth control, and V.D.), and diverse other life situations. Other authors, such as Norma Klein who explores many of these same issues, and Paula Danziger, whose main concern is coping with junior high school, are also teachers of social mores. Underneath their interesting, realistic, and often clever stories, they are teaching children how to behave, how to cope with problems. Because these stories are so popular with children and teenagers, they are all the more insidious if one does not agree with the values they portray. For example, the same parents and teachers who laugh over Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing and Superfudge and hurt over Blubber, find that they do not approve of Forever , but they can hardly tell their children not to read it. Judy Blume is the children's favorite author and many children will read whatever she writes. A large number of children are learning their whole value system from persons like Judy Blume. Since these authors are willing to discuss the types of problems that are foremost in many chidren's minds, problems

which often these children feel they cannot discuss with the adults around them, it is easy to see why children turn to these books. However, these authors are certainly not operating from a valueless background. They are clearly imposing their own viewpoint. Further, it is possible that they may even create the very problems which they are trying to help the child cope with. The youngster, who all this time had a rather good relationship with his mother or sister or teacher now starts to see how flawed these persons are.

What then are the values portrayed in modern children's books? Kindness, caring and understanding are always portrayed as good qualities. These are seen in such diverse books as Summer of the Swans by Betsy Byars, Summer of my German Soldier by Bette Greene, A Figure of Speech by Norma Mazer, and countless others. It is good to care, it is good to understand, and kindness is never out of place.

Other qualities considered praiseworthy are making decisions on one's own, independence, and simply growing up. Frequently these are the whole theme of a book and they are always portrayed in a positive light. Dicey's Song by Cynthia Voight, Where the Lilies Bloom by Vera and Bill Cleaver and Johnny Tremain by Esther Forbes are typical examples of these qualities.

Other values, and perhaps surprising ones in this hedonisitc age, are the qualities of study, work, and self-control. This theme is clear in all of S.E. Hinton's books from The Outsiders on. Books that deal with drugs stress the importance of self-control in overcoming drug abuse. That

is clearly true in both Go Ask Alice and A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich both of which have been banned in certain parts of the country.

Honesty is always portrayed as a value. Apparently honesty, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. If the young person can face up to his own emotions or his own actions and to others, he is considered as acting well. An example of a book with this theme for very young children is The Big Fat Enormous Lie but there are countless others for older children including, for example, Ellen Tebbits by Beverly Cleary and Haunted Summer by Hope Dahl Jordan.

On the other side of the coin, certain qualities are usually considered undesirable in children's books. These are, of course, the reverse of the desirable values. As kindess, caring, self-control, and honesty are valued, their opposites are considered unacceptable behavior. Further, the use of drugs and alcohol (as in The Late Great Me by Sandra Scoppettone)are frequently found in books, but never as a recommended type of behavior. No type of sexual behavior is considered inappropriate. The emphasis is always on the problems connected with sexual behavior, the need for maturity to handle it, and the situations of the behavior. Here authors seem to be saying, do what you choose to do, but be sure it is really what you choose to do.

It is also interesting to see what qualities are not frowned upon but certainly not admired either. They are simply not considered as something we would want children to concentrate on. In direct contrast to what used to be

considered the prime virtues for children of the past, obedience and respect for elders and for authority are not valued. In fact in most stories, parents and other adults are treated as if they were non-existent, or unimportant, or they are seen as being the kind of people one feels sorry for more than one respects. Sometimes they are portrayed as downright cruel or simply stupid. This theme runs though Paula Danzinger's books. It was impossible to find any modern books that expressed the idea that children ought to be obedient to their parents or teachers just because they are their parents. In books of one hundred years ago that was a common theme.

There are, of course, other books that simply show the joy, the beauty, the love there is in life. These books are much more common for primary school children than for older children. Among those for older children, for example, the beautifully written Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Patterson, has won the prestigious Newberry Award, but this type of book is rarely the favorite of the children (although they may be of adults). What they demand of children is much deeper and higher than the problem books offer. And not many children are willing to commit themselves to the effort these books require to taste the new insights they offer. It is much easier to read a story that shows how a young girl comes to terms with the fact that the only teacher she ever liked is in trouble with the principal at her school.

It must be noted here that this is exactly what happens to adults who buy millions of easy novels and only hundreds of serious books.

To say that modern books for children are moralistic is not to say that they are taboo-ridden. In fact, at first glance one could say that all taboos are gone. There are books which deal with homosexuality (I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip), abortion (My Darling, My Hamburger), death, illness, old age, war, and even nuclear weapons. But there seems to be one last taboo and strangely enough it is precisely the one that moralists of a hundred years ago thought had to be in every book. And that is the taboo of religion.

A century ago, those who wrote lesson stories for children made it clear that a "good" boy or girl believed in God and that he or she was concerned with doing good, avoiding evil, and eventually gaining heaven. This underlying truth was always there. In today's books, religion is rarely touched on. It is treated as though it is simply not a part of one's life. There are a few books, though, that do touch on religion. In Judy Blume's book Are You There, God, it's Me, Margaret the eleven-year-old Margaret continually talks to God but decides ultimately that she cannot decide on a religion. The message is that a relationship with God may be a good thing, but belonging to a church is not very important. One wonders where Margaret learned about God. The fact is that most people learn about God from the religion that they are taught; this is why He is sometimes seen differently by different people. But in most children's books religion is simply never mentioned. If there is any faith it is certainly not looked upon as a source or a way to cope with problems. The religion of these books is clearly what fundamentalists call secular humanism. This is

especially curious in light of the fact that most Americans profess belief in one religion or another. The United States is not anti-religious. According to the U.S. Constitution, one religion is not to be favored over another, but religion itself is valued in this country; atheists are often looked upon suspiciously. They are viewed almost as suspicicusly as those who actully take their religion seriously. And this, I submit, is the crux of the problem.

And this brings us right back to the concept of censorship. It is easy to see why many people find children's books today disturbing. Some object to the old fairy tales, but most modern censors are much more concerned with books that deal with drug use, alcohol, sex, or, perhaps especially with explicit, vulgar, or obscene language. The number of groups of serious-minded people concerned with removing books from schools and public libraries is growing in the United States. One can only look at these groups with concern. But one need not fear them. They frequently act out of ignorance, not even reading the books they purport to be experts on.

It is knowledge that can be stronger than ignorance. The teacher or librarian who knows the books can respond to the criticism, pointing out to the censors that this is a pluralistic country and that each individual or group has rights to decide for themselves what they wish to read, but that none of them have the right to make such decisions for others.

At least, however, the book censors care about what is being read. They take reading seriously. They believe that

books do make a difference. And for that insight, we must be grateful.

References

Blume, J. (1970). Are You There, God, It's Me, Margaret. New York: Bradbury.

_____. (1974). Blubber. New York: Bradbury.

_____. (1973). Deenie. New York: Bradbury.

_____. (1975). Forever. New York: Bradbury.

_____. (1972). It's Not the End of the World. New York: Bradbury.

_____. (1980). Superfudge. New York: Dutton.

_____. (1972). Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. New York: Dutton.

_____. (1971). Then Again, Maybe I Won't. New York: Bradbury.

Cleary, B. (1951). Ellen Tebbits. New York: Dell.

Cleaver, V. & B.(1969). Where the Lilies Bloom. New York: Lippincott.

Danziger, P. (1974). The Cat Ate My Gymsuit. New York: Dell.

Donovan, J. (1969). I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip. New York: Harper & Row.

Forbes, E. (1943). Johnny Tremain. New York: Dell.

Greene, B. (1973). Summer of My German Soldier. New York: Dial.

Hinton, S.E. (1967). The Outsiders. New York: Viking.

Jordan, H.D. (1967). Haunted Summer. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

Mazer, N.F. (1973). A Figure of Speech. New York: Delacorte.

Paterson, K. (1977). Bridge to Terabithia. New York: Crowell.

Scoppettone, S. (1976). The Late Great Me. New York: Putnam.

Sharmat, M. (1978). The Big Fat Enormous Lie. New York: Dutton.

Voight, C. (1982). Dicey's Song. New York: Fawcett.

Zindel, P. (1969). My Darling, My Hamburger. New York: Harper & Row.